

Alexander Campbell's Thoughts On Slavery and Abolition

by Earl Eugene Eminhizer

Probably one of the most overlooked, but important and influential persons in the ante-bellum West, was Alexander Campbell. Although this neglect by the general historian is understandable, his being overlooked by the church historians is not. Campbell was not only one of the founders of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), but one of the earliest religious leaders in America to be concerned with church union. In addition, he was also a successful publisher, educator and farmer; and he was reported to be one of the wealthiest men in Western Virginia. This paper seeks to examine his views on one of the most pressing social and political problems of his times—slavery.

Campbell's views on slavery are easily misunderstood unless one keeps in mind the distinction that his father, Thomas Campbell, had made between matters of religious faith and private judgment in *The Declaration and Address*, a document he wrote for the Christian Church Association of Washington, Pennsylvania, in 1809. These views were accepted by Alexander and became the premise upon which he built his own interpretation. In *The Declaration and Address*, Thomas Campbell held that those things which were not specifically commanded in the Bible could not be made matters of faith.¹ They were matters for private judgment. Those which were commanded in the Bible were matters of faith and must be followed. The Campbells were of the opinion that division in the church was caused by failure to follow the Bible alone in matters of religion.

Accepting this premise as a basis for determining what could be considered matters of religion and what could not, Alexander Campbell rejected the slavery controversy as being a subject which was religious in character. Failure to understand his position on what was religious and what was political (or a matter of private judgment) led many of his contemporaries to criticize unjustly his views on the matter.

It has been suggested that Alexander Campbell's views on slavery can be divided into two periods: that before 1830, and that

¹ Propositions 5 through 7 of *The Declaration and Address*. (See H. Shelton Smith et al., *American Christianity* [New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1960] Vol. 1, 379-86.)

following 1830.² It has also been suggested that he changed his position in order to save the Disciple movement from division during the second period. Upon closer examination of Campbell's position, one finds that he did not change his views, but rather the emphasis that he placed on them.³

That Campbell opposed slavery cannot be denied, but he was not an abolitionist of the radical type. He opposed both slavery and abolition. Campbell's personal action in freeing slaves inherited from his father-in-law, and purchased from a Methodist minister, indicates his feelings on the matter.⁴ He did not oppose slavery for religious reason, but rather on political, social and economic grounds.

One of Campbell's earliest expressions of his feelings toward slavery appeared in the *Christian Baptist* in August, 1823, where he said:

If any thing is wanting to finish a picture of the most glaring inconsistencies, add to this those Christians who are daily extolling the blessing of civil and religious liberty, and, at the same time, by a system of the most cruel oppression, separating the wife from the embraces of her husband, and the mother from her tender offspring; violating every principle, and rendering every tie that endears life and reconciles man to his lot, and that, forsooth, because "might gives right," and a man is held guilty because his skin is a shade darker than the standard color of the times.⁵

Because he thought he saw an opportunity for the political elimination of slavery, Campbell entered the race for representative of his district to the Virginia Constitutional Convention in 1829. He was not alone in his views at the convention, but some were concerned that a move in the convention might make slavery a part of the constitution should the slaveholders win. For this reason, his views did not prevail and it was decided to keep slavery out of the constitution, thereby leaving it open to ordinary legislative action.⁶

Campbell recognized that any action which would end slavery would require political action. He was willing to support political action whenever he thought it would do some good. The Kentucky Constitutional Convention of 1850 presented such an opportunity.

² Alfred Thomas De Groot, *The Grounds of Division Among the Disciples*, (Chicago: privately printed), 75.

³ See Robert Frederick West, *Alexander Campbell and Natural Religion*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1948), 103; Harold L. Linger, *The Political Ethics of Alexander Campbell*, (St. Louis: Bethany Press, 1954), 64; Winfred Ernest Garrison, *Religion Follows the Frontier: A History of the Disciples of Christ*, (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1921), 174-86.

⁴ E. Roy Lindley, *Apostle of Freedom*, (St. Louis: Bethany Press, 1957), 100-102.

⁵ Alexander Campbell, "The Christian Religion," *Christian Baptist*, (August, 1823), 18.

⁶ Alexander Campbell, "The Crisis," *The Millennial Harbinger* (hereafter referred to as *the Harbinger*), (February, 1822), 44; Robert Richardson, *The Memoirs of Alexander Campbell*, (Nash-

Anticipating this, Campbell published in the *Millennial Harbinger* "A Tract for the People of Kentucky."⁷

In the "Tract" he presented arguments for positive action on the part of Christians in Kentucky to rid themselves of slavery at this time. Campbell's arguments favoring action by Christians in Kentucky were economic and moral, rather than Biblical.

Although Campbell had always opposed the mixing of religion and politics, we now find him telling the Kentucky Christians to "vote like Christians at the polls and demonstrate [their] love of liberty and right"⁸ by eliminating slavery from the state. He hoped that such a move would influence similar action in other states.⁹

Campbell found himself opposed to many of the political actions taken concerning slaves. Many states were passing laws forbidding the education of slaves, and Campbell's opposition to this was based on the belief that knowledge and slavery were incompatible.¹⁰ Thus, he reasoned that education of Negroes was proper, that it would prepare them for freedom, and that it would lead toward ending slavery.

Campbell noted that the relation of master and servant was a relationship going back to the beginning of time. He thought that "even in the Millennium . . . there will be master and servants."¹¹ But such a relationship did not mean that all servants were slaves, or that all masters were free. He even thought that masters ought to be emancipated from their slaves. They were themselves slaves to fear, since most were more afraid of their slaves than their slaves were of them. That such was the case was made plain to him in a bill presented to the Virginia legislature to prevent the education of Negroes. Such a law, he thought, was "the most effectual destruction of the liberty of the press which [he could] imagine."¹²

Although some readers (in the early days of the *Millennial Harbinger*) cautioned Campbell against saying anything about slavery, feeling that the less said the better,¹³ Campbell was not, at that time, to be silent on the matter. The Nat Turner insurrection, which occurred about this time, caused Campbell to hope that it would inspire the state of Virginia to do something about slavery.

⁷ "A Tract for the People of Kentucky," MH, (May, 1848).

⁸ *Ibid.*, 220.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ Rev Lindley, *Apostle of Freedom*, (St. Louis: Bethany Press, 1957), 102.

¹¹ Alexander Campbell, "Emancipation of White Slaves," MH, (March, 1830), 128-29.

¹² *Ibid.*, 128.

¹³ "To Alexander Campbell, Essex, Virginia, April 6, 1830, in the MH, (April, 1830), 140-91).

In commenting on this event, he pointed out that slavery was the most expensive labor system as well as the most wasteful of the real estate. The continued use of this system would, in his opinion, make Virginia a wilderness. He hoped that Virginia would, at this time, use her power to extricate herself from it, but he thought, this might be like saying that a drunkard has the power to become sober.¹⁴

In attempting to stimulate action in the early 1830's, Campbell described slavery,

. . . That largest and blackest blot upon our national escutcheon, that many-headed monster, that Pandora's box, that bitter root, . . . is now evoking the attention of the ancient and venerable commonwealth in a manner as unexpected as it is irresistible and cheering to every philanthropist. . . . We have thought that if the abolition of slavery was *legitimately* to be laid before the people of this commonwealth as it now is, there would be found even among slaveholders a majority to concur in a national system of emancipation.¹⁵

After Nat Turner's revolt in Virginia, Campbell presented a plan for the emancipation of slaves, and the resolution of the race problem. The nation was no longer in debt after 1832, leaving the government about ten million dollars which was no longer needed for payment on the debt. The use of this money had been discussed in Congress where Henry Clay had proposed that it be given to the states. Campbell opposed this use of the surplus but proposed instead that the money be used for the colonization of colored people, free and slave, in Africa. His suggested program would start in 1834, and continue until all the colored population had been removed.¹⁶ The free Negroes could be colonized at once; those that masters would emancipate could follow; and finally he proposed that female slaves of a given age would be bought from masters unwilling to emancipate. Such a program would, he believed, eliminate slavery in about twenty years.¹⁷ Most Disciple leaders, including those who opposed slavery, favored the colonization idea and supported the American Colonization Society, as did Campbell. Such a plan offered a solution to the race problem—a problem which was ignored by the abolitionists.

Campbell modified his proposal to eliminate slavery by suggesting that in addition to the surplus monies in the treasury that could be used, the Navy's ships, which were rotting in the harbors, could transport freed slaves to Liberia. He suggested that people petition Congress to that end.¹⁸

¹⁴ Alexander Campbell, "Slavery in Virginia," *MH*, (January, 1832), 15.
¹⁵ *Edinburgh*, *op. cit.*, 567-68.

¹⁶ Campbell, "The Crisis," 87.
¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 88.

¹⁸ Alexander Campbell, "Slavery and Anti-Slavery," *MH*, (December, 1835), 348.

Between the time that Campbell presented his plan and the publication of his next statement on slavery in 1835, changes took place in the attitude of the abolitionists. With the advent of the radical abolitionism in the 1830's, the methods of abolition changed as did the attitudes people held toward it. Campbell saw a great danger in the new approach, especially as it took on the overtones of a religious revival. The division which occurred among the Baptists and the Methodists in the 1840's seemed to demonstrate the wisdom of his view that the matter was not a religious one and could only lead to division if admitted into the church. To prevent division within the Disciple brotherhood, he changed his emphasis.

In 1834 Theodore D. Weld and the Lane Rebels¹⁹ were touring Ohio in behalf of abolition.²⁰ Campbell was at the same time on a tour of the South where he met with the reaction to the new program of abolitionism. Continuing to oppose slavery, he also began to oppose the radical abolitionists as well. This created difficulties since most were unwilling to allow any alternative besides proslavery or immediate abolition.

Since slavery was recognized by national law, the slaveholder was, in Campbell's mind, entitled to have his property protected. Just compensation would be necessary if the slaves were removed by a change in the law. He pointed out that the argument that slaves had not originally been slaves but had been forced or sold into slavery did not alter the circumstances at that time. He noted that neither the right of the South to slaves, nor the right of the North to the land it held was "at first obtained in the temple of Justice."²¹ Campbell was opposed to any group which interfered with the basic right to property.²²

As the abolitionist movement progressed in the 1830's, Campbell received more and more communications about slavery. Because of the emotions involved in the discussion of the issue, he did not think that a cool and dispassionate debate of it could be entered into during the latter part of the 1830's and early 1840's.²³ Also, Campbell's *Millennial Harbinger* was primarily a religious publication and political issues should be excluded.

Campbell had little to say in public print on the matter of slavery between 1835 and 1845. It was at this point that the Baptist

¹⁹ The Lane Rebels were the radical abolitionist students who left Lane Seminary because of the slavery question and moved to the newly founded Oberlin Seminary.

²⁰ Campbell, *op. cit.*, 247.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 248.

²² *Ibid.*

²³ *Ibid.*, 247.

and the Methodist churches split over the issue. Beginning a new series of articles entitled "Our Position to American Slavery," he made clear his belief that the beliefs of the Disciples were such that they were the only religious body whose principles (if adhered to) could save them from division. Campbell probably intended that the series should be the "official" position of the brotherhood. The reason he gave for the articles was to "do homage to his Majesty FREE DISCUSSION."²⁴

By 1845, the Abolitionist Crusade had established its argument against slavery. Campbell saw two groups developing: the "*Liberty Men*" or abolitionists, and the "*Non-Liberty Men*."²⁵ He also saw that the main issues of the debate were the moral and political evils of the system. It was to the moral evils that he was going to turn his attention, since this was the area which affected Christians.²⁶

In Campbell's opinion, Christians were limited in their discussion of slavery to what the Bible had to say about the issue. The discussion between Francis Wayland and Richard Fuller, both Baptists, had been based on the Bible.²⁷ As Christians, the Disciples could use no other authority. The abolitionists' position was that slavery was "not authorized by God," and was, for this reason, immoral. On the other hand, the proslavery group held that it was given divine authority and thus not immoral. Campbell did not deny that the abuse of the system and the unjust laws which controlled slavery were immoral, but he did not believe that this altered the basic issue of whether or not God approved or disapproved of slavery since the central question at this point for Campbell was "*What does the Bible teach on this subject?*"²⁸ Campbell was of the opinion that this was the only area of the discussion that Disciples could enter as Disciples.

Campbell's position on the Bible and slavery was developed in this series. It was stated in such a way that one could easily get the impression that he was proslavery. Campbell had the ability to keep separate various phases of a discussion. However, many who attacked him did so without keeping these divisions separate from each other. Campbell was, at this time, limiting the discussion to what the Bible had to say on the matter. His method of Biblical interpretation did not allow him to read into the text that which was not

²⁴ Alexander Campbell, "Our Position to American Slavery," *MH*, (February, 1845), 48.
²⁵ *Ibid.*, 51.
²⁶ *Ibid.*, 51.
²⁷ *Ibid.*, 51.
²⁸ *Ibid.*, 51.

there. Following this policy to the letter, Campbell's interpretation of the Bible on slavery was clear.

[In the] Church at the beginning, there were masters and slaves — sometimes Christian masters possessing Christian slaves — some church. . . . We, therefore, take the position—that, AS CHRISTIANS WE CAN LAWFULLY, UNDER CHRIST, GO NO FURTHER THAN TO EXACT FROM CHRISTIAN MASTERS AND CHRISTIAN SERVANTS ALL THAT IS COMPREHENDED IN THOSE PRECEPTS. We have no authority, *as Christians*, to go farther. We have no warrant to annihilate the relation; but we warrant, and are under obligation to enforce the precepts, and to see that the relative duties of both parties are faithfully performed.²⁹

Slavery fell into that area which Campbell considered *opinion*, and was not in that class of things which were *dogma*. For example, the Bible commanded baptism, thus, Christians had to be baptized; but since the Bible did not command missionary societies, Christians did not have to participate in them. Such activities could not be grounded in the Bible and were human institutions. Although everyone had to be baptized to be a member of the church, one did not have to support the mission cause to be a member. So Campbell reasoned the same was true of slavery-abolition. Being a slaveholder did not in itself violate the laws of God, and a Christian could hold slaves and still be a member of the church. This could also be said of the abolitionist. But Campbell did not think that either of these two points of view could be forced on the members of the church, nor could those holding to either of these views be excluded from membership. The church could take action against a slave or slaveholder, only if either failed to meet the obligations of the relationship between them as set down in the Bible.

Whatever side a Christian took in the issue was a personal matter. But Campbell was of the opinion that Christians were required to obey the laws of the state (Render unto Caesar. . .). For this reason, he felt that even though a law might be wrong or a person might not agree with it, a Christian was obligated to obey it. Thus, since slavery was the law of the land, right or wrong, Christians could not interfere with the enforcement of the law. Christians could take political action to change the law, but no more. Since many of the abolitionists were openly advocating the violation of the law, Campbell came into conflict with them.³⁰

Campbell also addressed himself to the question, was slavery a sin? This issue had been raised in 1841 by a group of Disciples

²⁹ *Ibid.*, (March, 1842), 108.
³⁰ *Ibid.*, 109.

on the Western Reserve in Ohio, when they published a document called *An Address to the Disciples on the Sin of Slavery by the Churches in Trumbull County, Ohio, and Vicinity*.³¹ This *Address* held that slavery was a sin. "The great cardinal question is," it said, "—Is it right for man to hold property in man?"³² The argument of the address rested on interpretation of what God intended for man. Such interpretation was a personal matter, but Campbell was fearful that this would be made a test of faith or dogma.³³

Since the relationship between master and slave was regulated in the Bible, Campbell did not think that it could be considered as immoral. The relationship was, in itself, not a sin.³⁴ Since there were regulations for every detail of this relationship, masters who failed to follow would be punished by God. It was the obligation of the church to see that the regulations were enforced between Christian masters and their slaves. The same was also true of slaves who were Christians. Both masters and slaves were to be removed from the church if they failed to follow the regulations.³⁵

Campbell found the regulations of slavery in I Timothy 6:1-4.³⁶

Let all who are under the yoke of slavery regard their masters as worthy of all honor, so that the name of God and the teachings may not be defamed. Those who have believing masters must not be disrespectful on the grounds that they are brethren; rather they must serve all the better since those who benefit by their service are believers and beloved. Teach and urge these duties.

Although Campbell opposed abolitionism as such, at the same time he thought that the church should take whatever action was necessary to protect Christian slaves from non-Christian masters who failed to follow the commands of God. It could also endeavor to have statutes modified or annulled if they were too rigorous. He even suggested that Christians should attempt to get fair trial for slaves and laws to prevent their sale for debt, which could result in the separation of families.³⁷

Since the Abolitionist Disciples considered slavery a sin, problems connected with this point of view were bound to come. Campbell had always allowed for individual interpretation of the Bible and did not have a creed to give direction to that interpretation. The Abolitionist Disciples such as Jonas Hartzel, John Boggs, and

³¹ The *Address* was published in Cincinnati by W. L. Marshall, 1841.
³² *An Address to the Disciples on the Sin of Slavery*, p. 1.
³³ Campbell, "Our Position to American Slavery," (April, 1845), 145-46.
³⁴ *Ibid.*, 1845, 145.
³⁵ *Ibid.*, 145.
³⁶ *Ibid.*, 145.
³⁷ *Ibid.*, 145.

Nathaniel Field,³⁸ interpreted the Bible in such a way that made slavery a sin. They thought Christians must give up their slaves to get rid of the sin. Campbell refused to recognize that their views might be right. He attempted to show that interference with slavery, the requiring of emancipation by a Christian master, and the making of antislavery or emancipation a test of fellowship, was to oppose the law of Christ and require more than the New Testament called for.³⁹

Biblical regulation of slavery was an area where Christians as such were more directly involved. Although he did not reverse his stand that the Bible did not oppose, but rather sanctioned slavery, he did use the Bible to indicate that slavery was not to be retained except under the safeguards of the Scriptures. He pointed out that Paul had said that slaves should be free when the opportunity presented itself (I Corinthians 7:21). This did not mean they could walk away at their pleasure, but could be free only by a mutual understanding between the slave and the master. Masters were required to educate the slaves if they were to give the slaves that which was "*just and equal*"⁴⁰ (Colossians 4:1). However, there were civil laws which prevented this.

Interestingly, Campbell's argument did not emphasize the requirements of the Bible between the master and the slave which were not being followed. He emphasized, however, the damage being done to the master's family. The children of slaveholders were exposed to the influence of the slaves, who were morally inferior. Since children imitate those who influence them or with whom they come in contact, they were being influenced along lines which were morally wrong. Campbell noted that the hired servants could also suffer from moral defects, but they, unlike the slaves, could be discharged. He was of the opinion that the children imitated the actions of the Negroes more than that of the hired whites.⁴¹

Campbell summarized his position as follows: (1) "That the relation of master and slave is not, in itself, sinful or immoral." (2) That as practiced in some parts of the world, it was inexpedient, since it was out of harmony with the advance and moral view of society, nor did it contribute to the economic well-being of the country. It also placed on Christian masters difficult burdens. (3)

³⁸ James Hinton was a minister in the Western Reserve of Ohio, who was a leader in the organization of Disciple Abolitionists to support Parker Butler. John Boyga was another leader of the Disciple Abolitionists who edited the Disciple Abolitionist papers. Nathaniel Field, M.D., was an early vocal Disciple Abolitionist in Indiana.

³⁹ Campbell, *op. cit.*, 125, 224.

⁴⁰ Campbell, "A Treatise for the People of Kentucky," *MS.*, *op. cit.*, 248.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 224.

That, in accordance with the New Testament, the churches could not make slavery a test of fellowship.⁴²

Campbell also had a basic distrust of the abolitionists. He felt that they desired to divide and dismember the churches.⁴³ Because of this, he indicated in 1845 that he was not going to allow further discussion of the issue in the *Millennial Harbinger*. Campbell also was convinced that his position was that taken by the Bible and that thus, there was no need for further discussion along the Biblical line.⁴⁴

Campbell's attempt to suppress the issue did not last long. A. B. Green, a Disciple abolitionist of Wadsworth, Ohio, offered criticism of Campbell's position to which Campbell felt a response necessary. Green pointed out differences between American slavery and that of Biblical times. He noted that Biblical slavery did not make a distinction as to color or race. American slavery did. He also thought that it was wrong to steal a man and sell him, and he noted that American slaves had originally been stolen.⁴⁵

Campbell responded with a discussion of the origins of slavery which he believed could be found in war, the loser being enslaved by the victor. He rejected the idea that American slaves had been stolen and maintained that they have been born into slavery. Campbell did not, at that time,⁴⁶ think that what had happened to their ancestors altered the case.

By this time, the editor of the *Liberty Herald*, an abolitionist paper published at Warren, Ohio, on the Western Reserve, had accused Campbell of being two-faced. One face said what the South wished to hear, that slavery was not a sin; and the other what the North wished to hear, that slavery was out of step with the modern age.⁴⁷

By 1845, it was clear that Campbell was not emphasizing those things he had emphasized in 1830, a fact pointed out to him by S. York of Illinois in 1846. York reminded Campbell that in 1832 he had considered slavery the blackest blot on the nation and a blighting curse, but in 1845, it was sanctioned by the Bible. The "Blighting Curse" was now something which was "right."⁴⁸ The discussion

⁴² Campbell, "Our Position to American Slavery," MH, (June, 1845), 262-63.

⁴³ See Gilbert Hobbs Barnes, *The Anti-Slavery Impulse, 1830-1844*, (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1964), 92-93, for Garrison's attack on the churches.

⁴⁴ Alexander Campbell, "American Slavery," MH, (August, 1845), 353-58.

⁴⁵ A. B. Green to Alexander Campbell, Wadsworth, Ohio, July, 1845, in MH (September, 1845), 412-13.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 413.

⁴⁷ *Liberty Herald*, (August 13, 1845).

⁴⁸ S. York to Alexander Campbell, Edgar County, Illinois, July 14, 1846, in MH, (October, 1846), 527.

of Campbell's views in the *Liberty Herald* indicated that he had an audience beyond the Disciple Press. His change of emphasis was known in Europe before his trip to the British Isles in 1847.

During a trip to Scotland and England in 1847, Campbell was attacked by a group of abolitionists. However, it appears that slavery was not the only issue in the controversy. Involved also was the fact that two prominent members of a Congregational Church at Leith had joined Campbell's followers, resulting in jealousy among the clergy. This resulted in a conscious attempt on the part of those opposed to the Disciples to discredit Campbell before the people.⁴⁹ Campbell, being from a slave state, made possible an attack on the issue of slavery. Caught off guard by James Robertson, S. M. Kennedy, and a Mr. Hunter of the Scotch Anti-Slavery Society, Campbell spoke freely about his feelings on the issue as well as on his reasons for opposing abolitionism. He felt that foreign interference in American slavery would only make the matter worse. Campbell did not, it appears, defend slavery as such, but his remarks were made to indicate that he had defended the institution.⁵⁰ Placards soon appeared opposing Campbell saying:

Citizens of Edinburgh—Beware! The Rev. Alexander Campbell of Virginia, United States of America, has been a slaveholder himself and is still a defender of man-stealers!⁵¹

Although he did not want to be involved in the slavery controversy, Campbell was now forced to make a public statement on his position.⁵²

Early in Campbell's tour of Britain, James Robertson had challenged him to debate the issue of slavery and Campbell had agreed to do so in writing. Robertson declined this form of debate.⁵³ On finding the placards at his next appointment, Campbell sent a letter to the *Edinburgh Journal* saying that he would debate anyone on the subject of slavery, except "the Reverend James Robertson who was publicly censored and excluded from the Baptist Church for violating the fifth commandment in reference to his mother. . . ."⁵⁴ This placed the controversy on a level of personal vindictive. Campbell was now arrested and sued for slander. In order to dramatize the issue, Campbell refused to post bond and was kept in jail. This

⁴⁹ Richardson, *op. cit.*, 352.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 352-53.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 353; *Anti-Slavery Bugle*, (October 8, 1847).

⁵² Richardson, *op. cit.*, 352.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 354.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 353.

afforded him publicity at home as well as in Scotland. The trial went in his favor.⁵⁵

Campbell seems to have had the same problem in Scotland, as he had in America, of getting people to make a distinction between what they could do based on the Bible and what they could do as citizens. In a public discussion of the matter, Campbell pointed out to the people of Scotland that abolition could be carried out only on a state-by-state basis. This his audience did not seem to understand.⁵⁶ *The Anti-Slavery Bugle* summed up Campbell's position very well when it said,

So far as we understand Mr. Campbell's argument, it is that slavery is an evil, moral, political and social; and he would be very glad that slavery could be abolished, but believes also that the justice of slavery is established by the Bible. . . .⁵⁷

The economic argument was one that Campbell felt most important. He noted that economists judge institutions in terms of their effect on wealth and development of a state. He thought the best economists were at that time opposed to slavery because of its adverse effect on these two areas.⁵⁸ As evidence for slavery's effect, Campbell referred to the last three United States censuses. Those states not having slavery were growing economically. He compared the value of the harvest of Kentucky with that of Ohio in 1848, and found that Ohio had a harvest worth \$49,455,000 while Kentucky had a harvest worth only \$23,174,000. The harvest in Ohio was worth \$26,281,000 more. In addition, Campbell noted that Kentucky was larger and had better soil. Also Kentucky had been developed before Ohio and had five times the population of Ohio when Ohio was admitted to the Union. The obvious question was—Why was Kentucky behind? The answer—slave labor!⁵⁹

Campbell further expressed himself on the issue in answering a response to the "Tract."⁶⁰ He said that it was necessary that men come to see that "slavery in Kentucky or America is . . . contrary to the general moral sense, the moral taste, and the spirit of the present civilized world."⁶¹ He also stated that "slavery, as established by

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 364.

⁵⁶ "American Slavery Defended," *Edinburgh Weekly Express in the Anti-Slavery Bugle*, (October 1, 1847).

⁵⁷ "Alexander Campbell," *Anti-Slavery Bugle*, (November 19, 1847).

⁵⁸ "A Tract for the People of Kentucky," *MH*, (May, 1848).

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 266-67.

⁶⁰ Abraham Smith to Alexander Campbell, Smithland (Kentucky) in *MH*, (July, 1849), 413.

⁶¹ Alexander Campbell to Abraham Smith, *MH*, (July, 1849), 414.

our laws."⁶² was not in harmony with the Bible, since the laws prevented the masters from doing that which was "just and equal."⁶³

At about this same time, the national government passed a new law concerning fugitive slaves which led to a great deal of discussion in the North. The abolitionists were opposed to obeying it. Campbell felt called on to express his views on this new crisis.

Campbell's position was based on governmental authority. He did not believe that Christians should resist laws for any reason. Since government received its authority from God, it was, therefore, to be obeyed.⁶⁴ There were orderly methods of recourse for those who did not like the law. They could bring it before the Supreme Court which would rule on its constitutionality; and, should that fail, then they could elect representatives who would repeal it.

That Christians were to return runaway slaves was seen in the example set by Paul in his return of Onesimus. An objection to the return of slaves was the treatment they would receive upon returning home. Campbell did not consider the treatment the runaway might receive on his return as a factor to be considered in whether or not he was to be returned. The slave's treatment was not the moral concern of the person returning him. His only concern was his obligation to obey the law.

Campbell was concerned with an abstract moral idea that the motive determined the morality of the act. Thus, when one was motivated to obey the civil law, one was motivated properly; the results of this action was beyond the morality of the act, and something over which one had no control. The abolitionists, on the other hand, felt that slavery was itself wrong, thus to be avoided, and that the treatment of the individual slave was the determining factor in the morality of the issue. If they were wrongly held, or might be mistreated if returned, then the moral obligation was to not return them, and civil law made no difference.⁶⁵

Campbell found himself in conflict with the Bible when he used Deuteronomy 5:21 and Exodus 20:17 (where the command not to covet the neighbor's property appears) as a source of authority for his stand. He failed to answer satisfactorily the command in Deuteronomy 23:15-16 not to return an escaped slave to his master. He suggested that this was for special cases and not the general law, since Paul had not followed it.⁶⁶

⁶² *Ibid.*

⁶³ *Ibid.*

⁶⁴ Alexander Campbell, "Our Position on American Slavery," *MH*, (January, 1851), 20-21.

⁶⁵ Alexander Campbell, "The Fugitive Slave Law," *MH*, (January, 1851), 28.

⁶⁶ Alexander Campbell, "The Fugitive Slave Law," *op. cit.*, 31.

Most of the criticism which was aimed at his position centered on his failure to consider Mark 12:31, "Love your neighbor as yourself." In contrast to his statement of the Christian ethic, Campbell held that the slave was no more than property and what happened to the return slave was the responsibility of the owner. He thought that, should the owner kill the slave, he would be punished by the loss of the money which he had invested in the slave.⁶⁷

Campbell's attitude is difficult to understand here, when placed against the background of his attempts to get slavery removed from Virginia in 1830 and Kentucky in 1849, and his treatment of his own slaves. He seemed to have recognized the inconsistency of his position for by the middle of 1851, he began to modify his views. He again emphasized that the Bible supported the ownership of slaves, but it also regulated it. The relationship between master and slave was for him summed up in one statement, "Be just and kind to your servants" (Colossians 4:1). He did not reject the application of the Golden Rule to the relationship, but he did not apply it to the basic relationship; that is, Campbell did not believe that one could ask if he would like to be a slave, but rather, how he would like to be treated if he were. The relationship itself was assumed to be just.⁶⁸

Onesimus provided Campbell with an example of Christian treatment of slaves. What Paul did in this case was what was to be done in all cases. He returned Onesimus to Philemon because of the latter's prior right to Onesimus.⁶⁹

Although inhuman action against slaves was practiced in some cases, this was not considered as a valid reason for overthrowing the institution. Campbell pointed out that husbands had abused their wives, and parents their children, but such action was not used as an argument against the institution of marriage and parenthood.⁷⁰

Campbell considered that as long as the Fugitive Slave Law was on the books, all law-abiding citizens are obligated to obey it. However, at the same time, he pointed out that this did not require citizens of the North to refuse to act kindly toward the Negro. He also noted that the law required that one not conceal a fugitive so that he could not be discovered; and this was effective only after legal notice and evidence that the person involved was a runaway. He said, "You may feed, clothe, and lodge him, provided you so not

⁶⁷ Alexander Campbell, "Slavery and the Fugitive Slave Law," *MH*, (May, 1851), 252.
⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, (June, 1851), 254-55.
⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 256.
⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, (July, 1851), 267.

harbor or conceal him, so as to prevent discovery and arrest, after notice of knowledge that he is a fugitive.'"⁷¹ This raises some questions about Campbell's sincerity concerning the enforcement of the law. Such an interpretation would allow the abolitionists to aid an escaping slave over the underground railroad, and stay within the law. It would appear at this point that he was interested only in the letter of the law, not the spirit of the Bible, particularly the New Testament.

Although Campbell seems to have taken the side of the abolitionists in his interpretation and application of the slave law, he did continue to think that they were the source of much trouble and their activities had slowed emancipation in the South. Prior to the rise of abolitionism, he thought the South would probably have adopted some system of colonization.⁷² This interest decreased in inverse ratio with northern interference, he thought.⁷³

The solution to the problem was to be found, he believed, in the program of the American Colonization Society. Campbell did not think that the abolitionists could ever eliminate slavery in the New World.⁷⁴ Since slavery was supported by law, the repeal of the law was necessary in order to stop it.

That Campbell was hostile to slavery throughout his life is unquestioned. That he consistently retained the same emphasis on the subject is not the case. He seems to have placed his emphasis on those things where he thought the changing times indicated the best interest could be served. Following the rise of the abolitionists he seems to have leaned more toward the slaveholder, but he was not in agreement with either. He saw the rights of the slaveholder being violated by the abolitionists and this he considered important. But most important was the prevention of division of the church over the issue. He was successful for a time as the Disciples did not divide until 1859. In the church and its action on slavery, he insisted on the historic Disciple position that where the Bible spoke, the church could speak; where the Bible was silent, it was to be silent.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 308.
⁷² Also known, a modern interpretation of this period, says that "Campbell's viruperative words against slavery . . . had some responsibility for the fact that . . . early in the century . . . colonization had been common in the South, but by 1837 not one was left."
⁷³ Also known, *Journal of the American Historical Association*, 1947, 149.